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Luke 8:26-39

## FORSAKE NOT

This Jewish rabbi was not where he was supposed to be. Jesus and his followers have just crossed the Sea of Galilee to reach the region of Gerasenes which was Gentile territory. And in those biblical times, Jewish people and gentile peoples did not willingly interact. Jewish people sought to abide by various purity codes, and gentile people were regarded as ritually unclean. But nevertheless Jesus heads off in a boat to the Gerasenes region anyway—to a place that no self-respecting Jewish rabbi would knowingly or willingly go. It seems, however, that Jesus was deliberate in making this journey.

No sooner than setting foot on the shore, Jesus is confronted by a man who is described as having been possessed by demons. Not just one demon, but many demons. In all likelihood, where the biblical stories speak of demon possession, we today might diagnose them as having a mental illness or possibly being afflicted with epilepsy. People didn't understand what was going on, and so they would label people as having a demon.

But if we define “demon” as being those forces that have captured us and prevented us from living as God intends, then we all are afflicted. All we have to do is look in the mirror to see someone possessed by the demons of anger, or materialism, or anxiety, or jealousy. We all have our demons that hold us captive.

In our story today, the afflicted man behaved in ways that likely scarred the rest of his community because they ostracized him and he is forced to live among the tombs of the dead—another place that would be considered ritually unclean. This added detail further emphasizes how completely alien this whole situation would have been for a respected Jewish rabbi like

Jesus. Jesus has traveled to an “unclean” territory, and brings healing to a man possessed by an “unclean” spirit, who was living in an “unclean” place. Imagine what Jesus’ followers must have been thinking! Why are we here in this God-forsaken place? Why are we engaging with this God-forsaken person?

But if the gospel teaches us anything, it is that this is precisely where God shows up. With God, no place is God-forsaken. With God, no people are God-forsaken. No one is unclean. No one is abandoned. No one is rejected. No one. There are no conditions you first must meet in order to receive God’s love. Think about that. There are no conditions you must first meet in order to receive God’s love. God loves everyone: the Muslim, the Jew, the Christian, the gay, the straight, the transsexual, the Asian, the Black, the Latino, the non-believer, the addict. God’s love is unshakable, even when we forsake God and God’s ways.

And one of the most common ways we forsake God’s ways is when we forsake one another—when we reject and exclude and abandon one another. I wonder if you have ever felt forsaken at some time in your life—rejected, abandoned, excluded. Maybe by a spouse or a friend. Maybe by your parents. Maybe by your colleagues. Maybe by your children. Maybe you have even felt during a time of great affliction that even God had forsaken you. But what we learn in scriptures is that God never forsakes. In fact, that is the whole point of Jesus’ life and message: to tell us and show us that we are *not* forsaken by God. In Jesus God comes to us, shares our human existence, joins us in our struggles and our pain, stands with us in adversity, extends compassion to us in our sorrow, offers healing in our brokenness, endures suffering and even death, and rises from the grave *so that we will know that we are not forsaken!* No matter how badly we mess up, no matter how grave our mistakes may be, no matter what has happened to us or by us in our lives, God does not forsake us. God does not forsake you.

And yet, we humans forsake one another all the time. Sometimes we forsake one another emotionally. Maybe you've known people who withhold or withdraw their emotional engagement. Sometimes people are rejected by their relatives—when parents reject their children, kick them out of the house because they are gay, cut them off because they disagree with their child's choices. There are entire groups of people that are forsaken by society. Those living with mental illness, like the man in our story, are today still largely neglected. If you travel to the West coast states, like Oregon, Washington, California, you will likely see massive encampments of homeless people living right on the streets of busy cities or along the roadside or at the end of a residential neighborhood. Forsaken, neglected, ignored. Some people are forsaken simply because we have abandoned them to life's hardships and ignored their needs, and turned away to leave them to struggle on their own.

The tragic shooting at Tops grocery store here in Buffalo has highlighted how an entire region of our city has long been forsaken. The East Side of Buffalo has largely been abandoned by our region's elected officials, as well as our more prosperous citizens, as well as by ordinary people like us going about our lives, and this part of our city has been left to struggle with life's economic and social hardships on its own. Main Street has become the great barrier dividing our city—dividing our city racially but also dividing our city between those communities that receive economic resources and revitalization and those parts of our city that have long been neglected.

Our story today reveals how Jesus transcends barriers between peoples to bring the message that *no one is forsaken*. When sailing across the Sea of Galilee, Jesus crossed his community's version of Main Street. He transcended ethnic and religious and cultural barriers. And through his healing of the afflicted man, Jesus teaches us that no one is forsaken by God. And if God forsakes no one, how can we?

Demons of one kind or another hold all of us captive, but the demons of racism, of greed, of consumerism, of exceptionalism are ones that continue to hold our nation captive and cause us to forsake one another.

Our story today is about the love of God that comes to us to liberate us from the demons that hold us captive. And that love is our hope. That love is our salvation. That love is what we gather here to rehearse and remember and to practice. We gather here because we believe in the liberating love and power of God.

Do you remember what happens after Jesus heals the afflicted man? The rest of the community is totally freaked out. The members of the community are so freaked out to see the afflicted man suddenly liberated that they ask Jesus to just please go! And then the man who was healed asks if he can follow Jesus. He wants to go with Jesus. But Jesus tells the man to stay in his own community and to tell the others how much God has done for him. Instead of taking this man away with him, Jesus saw just how much that community needed a witness, a living, breathing, irrefutable witness to the liberating power of God. Stay and be a witness, Jesus tells him. And he did.

Be a witness, Jesus says to us. Be a living, breathing, irrefutable witness to the liberating power of God's love. In your daily life, in the choices you make, the people you care for, the way you spend your money, be a witness so that no one shall be forsaken.